



JOURNAL BRIEF: Understanding the Social Benefits of Community Gardens in East Harlem

Sustainable Healthy Cities Journal Brief - 2019, No. 10 - Community Gardens and Social Benefits

This brief is adapted from the following peer-reviewed journal article: Petrovic, N., Simpson, T., Orlove, B., & B. Dowd-Urbe. (2019). Environmental and social dimensions of community gardens in East Harlem. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 183(2019), 36-49.

Study Intent and Research Question

This study is motivated by an interest in understanding whether an ecosystem services perspective on community gardens (heat island mitigation, food cultivation, etc.) can be combined with attention to the other potential benefits of gardens such as social cohesion. This study focuses on two questions: (1) what are the basic characteristics of community gardens in East Harlem, New York City, and (2) what are the social and environmental factors that affect place attachment to gardens? This study measures physical aspects of 35 gardens as well as gardeners' self-reported experiences, considering community gardens in the context of urban green infrastructure along with parks, green roofs, street trees, and bioswales.

Key Background Information

Community gardens take various forms: planted flowers on vacant lots, collections of individual garden plots, etc.

Motivations for community gardening articulated in existing literature include: local food production, increased healthy food consumption, social engagement, ecosystem service provision (e.g. heat and flood mitigation), civic engagement and collective efficacy.

There are examples of gardens facing redevelopment pressure that have galvanized local community coalitions and political action in opposition to redevelopment.

Community gardens are sometimes read as "temporary" sites, which can make them particularly susceptible to development pressure.

In East Harlem, there are 1.2 acres of open space per 1000 residents, which is below the recommended threshold of 2.5 acres (New Yorkers for Parks, 2012).

Studies of physical measures and place attachment show that quiet areas, attractive buildings, and green areas positively affect neighborhood attachment (Bonaiut et al., 1999).

Key Findings

Garden Participation and History:

- Gardens are a part of weekly life for many gardeners: 39% of participants stated they had come to the garden seven or more times in the previous week while 43% stated that they visited one to three times.
- Most gardeners live near the gardens: 54% live on the same block, 80% live within two blocks, and 96% live within eight blocks.
- Many of the gardens have been neighborhood fixtures for years. 40% of the gardeners reported visiting the gardens for more than ten years.
- Cumulatively, gardeners contribute thousands of hours of unpaid work each year maintaining the gardens.

Fresh Food and Ecosystem Services:

- Growing food was stated as important for 98% of gardeners (strongly agree: 77%, agree: 21%). Many garden members indicated that growing food gives them a sense of ownership, connection, and responsibility.
- A majority of the gardeners indicated that garden produce is a weekly staple at their dinner table during peak season. However, the actual quantity of vegetables in such meals is relatively small: < 15% stated that most of the produce they eat comes from the garden.
- Gardeners themselves generally did not discuss benefits in terms of ecosystem services, beyond viewing the gardens as places to cool off on hot days.

Social Connectedness:

- A large majority of participants indicated they know their neighbors better because of the garden and that they see

people in the garden that they would not otherwise see.
--A large majority of gardeners indicated they know the names of most of the people in the garden and that they often talk with people they know.
--Generally, the gardeners who visited gardens more frequently were older. Some older gardeners discussed the importance of the social support system gardens provides.

Place Attachment:

--A majority of garden members reported a strong connection to, and satisfaction with, their respective gardens.
--Positive place attachment was associated with social connectedness. Attachment was strong among gardeners who say they know neighbors better because of the garden, as well as among those who say they know the names of other garden members.
--Physical garden features were not associated with higher or lower levels of place attachment among gardeners. Almost half of garden members indicated insecurity regarding the future of the gardens and reported thinking their garden will likely be taken away in the next ten years.

Policy and Practice Implications

Increased fresh food access or ecosystem services need not be the only, or primary, policy motivation for gardens.

The social connections that gardens foster may be an equally (or more) important policy rationale for supporting gardens as part of neighborhood green space.

Protections against the sale and redevelopment of garden sites may need to be provided directly by the city or in partnership with non-profit and/or quasi-public entities.

Multiple garden types can support social connectedness goals. There is no a priori policy reason to support one type of garden configuration over another if the motivation is to support social connectedness.

Because gardeners directly manage community garden sites, their values should be taken into consideration when decisions are made about public support and resources for gardens.



Green Infrastructure



Urban Farming



Wellbeing

Further Reading and References

--Bonaiuto, M., Aiello, A., Perugini, M., Bonnes, M., & Ecolani, P. (1999). Multidimensional perception of residential environment quality and neighborhood attachment in the urban environment. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 19, 331–352. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jevp.1999.0138>
--GreenThumb. (2015). *The GreenThumb gardener’s handbook*. City of New York Department of Parks & Recreation. https://greenthumb.nycgovparks.org/pdf/gardeners_handbook.pdf
--New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. (n.d.) *How to Start a GreenThumb Community Garden*. https://greenthumb.nycgovparks.org/start_a_garden.html
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